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FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6302
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 000694

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NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2024
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: NEA ACTING A/S FELTMAN'S MAY 20 VISIT TO PARIS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen H. Allegrone, reas
ons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S/NF) Summary: NEA Acting A/S Jeffrey Feltman and OVP Senior Advisor Herro Mustafa discussed at length Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the prospects for Middle East peace during a May 20 meeting with French MFA officials. Middle East Director Patrice Paoli said the GOF agreed with the need for a time frame to assess whether the U.S. opening to Iran is working, while DAS-equivalent Martin Briens predicted that Iran would offer some semblance of cooperation on Afghanistan and Iraq without addressing the international community's core concerns on the nuclear file. Paoli suggested coordinated approaches to the GCC states, emphasizing the need for them to be more assertive with Russia and China on Iran. On Iraqi relations with Kuwait, the French proposed that the P3 should work with both parties to address Kuwaiti concerns about the border and ease the reparations burden on Iraq. Paoli offered a somewhat rose-tinted review of Syrian behavior, saying that in general France has accrued gains by engaging Damascus. "We don't have to reward Syria for anything at this point, but we believe in the process (of engagement) and need to draw them further away from Iran," he said. Feltman underscored that while the U.S. is committed to trying to work with Syria, there are limits to how far the relationship can progress without Syrian cooperation on stemming the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq. Feltman also expressed disappointment with the French decision to issue a visa to former Lebanese General Jamil Sayyed; Paoli claimed the MFA had little choice in the matter, but the French also defended their decision on the grounds that Sayyed might well be a minister in the next Lebanese cabinet. As for the peace process, Paoli noted that France was more interested in coordinating with like-minded states (i.e., the US and UK) than in trying to work within the EU framework at the moment. He noted that France and the UK have been discussing ways to "operationalize" the Arab Peace Initiative, but added that a freeze on settlement construction "needs to be step number one." Feltman regretted the French decision to withdraw its fixed-wing air assets from the Multinational Force Observers (MFO) in the Sinai; the French explained that decision in terms of fiscal pressures and disappointment with the MFO's performance during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Paoli pointed out that neither the Israelis nor the Egyptians have engaged the GOF on the issue thus far. End summary.

Participants

12. (SBU) NEA Acting A/S Jeffrey Feltman, accompanied by OVP Senior Advisor Herro Mustafa, PolMinC and controloff met May 20 with MFA Middle East Director Patrice Paoli, PDAS-equivalent Nathalie Loiseau, DAS-equivalents Martin Briens and Ludovic Pouille, FM Kouchner's Middle East advisor Christophe Bigot, Syria desk officer Patrick Durel, Iran desk

officer Arnaud Pescheux, and James Miller (currently on loan to the MFA via the Fellowship of Hope).

Iran

13. (S/NF) A/S Feltman began by noting the strong partnership between the US and France on the Iranian nuclear program, and stressed the need for strong international unity going forward. Paoli concurred, adding that France welcomed the US opening to Iran and agreed with the President's approach that there must be a time frame for assessing whether the opening is working. He asked about the key criteria for making such an assessment, and whether there would be any further bilateral US gestures towards Iran after the presidential election in June. Recalling his visit to Tehran earlier this spring, Paoli said his mission was to see whether the Iranians were serious about improving their bilateral relations with France. "The message we got was: no message," said Paoli, who said the Iranian leadership seemed unable to reach a decision on whether and how to proceed. He predicted that President Ahmadinejad would be reelected on June 12, and suggested that even a Mousavi victory might make little difference on the issues of greatest concern to the international community. DAS-equivalent Martin Briens (the MFA's point person on the Iranian nuclear program) said the key question was whether the Iranians were serious about negotiations or not. He predicted that the Iranians would offer some semblance of cooperation on Afghanistan and Iraq without making any substantive concession on the nuclear file. Briens suggested that if the Iranians did not move by October, then it would be time to start teeing up tougher

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measures to increase the pressure on Tehran. Paoli suggested the need for coordinated Western approaches to the GCC states, urging them to take a more assertive line with both the Russians and the Chinese on Iran. "The Gulf States need to tell the Russians and the Chinese that if they want to be partners with the GCC members then they need to start taking a more helpful line on Iran," he said.

Iraq/Kuwait

14. (S/NF) Turning to Iraq's somewhat bumpy relations with Kuwait, proposed a coordinated P3 approach to PM Maliki's government, cautioning the Iraqis against offending the Kuwaitis (e.g., by not showing up for meetings) and thereby giving the Kuwaitis a pretext for not engaging. In addition, the Iraqis need to offer the Kuwaitis some reassurances about the disputed Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. At the same time, the P3 could encourage Kuwait to take steps towards easing Iraqi reparations for the Gulf War. "President Sarkozy promised PM Maliki that France would help Iraq get out from under Chapter 7, but not at the expense of Kuwaiti interests," said Paoli.

Syria/Lebanon

15. (S/NF) Paoli presented a somewhat rose-tinted assessment of Syrian behavior, saying that France's policy of engagement has produced benefits, including Syrian support of the Union for the Mediterranean, the historic opening of a Syrian embassy in Lebanon, and Syrian interest in having France co-sponsor peace talks between Syria and Israel. Paoli claimed that Iraqi PM Maliki and Vice President Adil Abdel Mehdi both told the French that they had seen improvements in Syrian behavior over the past year, including the appointment of a Syrian ambassador to Baghdad. Paoli acknowledged that Syrian performance on human rights and on some issues related to Lebanon (e.g., border demarcation, accounting for missing prisoners) was less inspiring. Paoli noted that France does not plan to send any high level visitors to Damascus prior to the Lebanese election, adding: "We don't have to reward Syria for anything at this point, but we believe in the process (of

engagement) and need to draw them further away from Iran."

¶6. (S/NF) Feltman underscored that while the U.S. is committed to trying to work with Syria, there are limits to how far the relationship can progress without Syrian cooperation on stemming the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq.

Feltman also expressed disappointment with the French decision to issue a visa to former Lebanese General Jamil Sayyed; given Sayyed's history as the face of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, receiving him in Paris two weeks before the Lebanese election would send a particularly untimely signal. Paoli said the GOF intended to downplay the import of Sayyed's visit, and claimed the MFA had little choice in the matter, inasmuch as the MFA was required to cooperate with the French judiciary and a French judge had already fixed an appointment with Sayyed. Bigot chimed in, arguing that the French had no legal grounds for turning down the visa application, only political ones, and that French Ambassador to Beirut Andre Parant had recommended that the visa be granted. Ludovic Pouille defended the decision on the grounds that Sayyed might well be a minister in the next Lebanese cabinet. Feltman replied that relations between the US and Lebanon would become more difficult if the pro-Syrian figures such as Sayyed occupied sensitive cabinet positions (e.g., Minister of Justice) in the next Lebanese government.

Israeli-Palestinian Relations

¶7. (S/NF) Feltman briefed Paoli about Israeli PM Netanyahu's visit to Washington. Paoli expressed support for the President's approach, and said it was important that the Israelis feel "a sense of urgency" about the need to make progress on the Palestinian front. Expressing some frustration with the EU's inability to reach consensus on issues involving Israelis and Palestinians, Paoli said that France was more interested in coordinating with like-minded states (i.e., the US and UK) at the moment than in trying to work within an EU context. He noted that France and the UK have been discussing ways to "operationalize" the Arab Peace Initiative, but added that a freeze on settlement construction "needs to be step number one." Paoli noted that Israeli PM Netanyahu would visit Paris during the first week of June, prior to the June 6 meeting between Presidents Obama and Sarkozy at Normandy.

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MFO Air Assets

¶8. (S/NF) Feltman regretted the French Ministry of Defense (MOD) decision to withdraw its fixed-wing air assets from the Multinational Force Observers (MFO) in the Sinai and strongly encouraged the French to reconsider. He emphasized the important role that the MFO plays in maintaining security and stability along the Egyptian-Israeli border. "I knew you were going to raise this," Paoli said ruefully. He explained that the French decision was largely due to fiscal pressures.

Bigot added that it was not merely an MOD decision, but rather the outcome of interagency discussions among principals. He intimated that the decision also reflected disappointment with the MFO's performance during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, during which the MFO had displayed little creativity. Paoli said the French were open to discussions about how the MFO might become more effective in the future. While he did not promise that France would change its position on the aircraft, he did say that both the Israelis and the Egyptians were welcome to engage the GOF "at any level" on the issue. Thus far, he claimed, they had not.

Farouk el-Hosny

¶9. (S/NF) Turning to Farouk el-Hosny's UNESCO DG candidacy, Paoli noted that the Israelis had notified the French embassy

in Tel Aviv of the change in their position. Paoli and Bigot said that despite the Israeli change, France would not vote for el-Hosny, but on the other hand would not actively campaign against him either. Paoli indicated that the GOF would be pleased to see a viable alternative candidate emerge.

110. (U) This cable has been cleared by A A/S Feltman.

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